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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 009890

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SUBJECT: PARTIES PREPARE THEIR ELECTORAL STRATEGIES

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11. (S/NF) Summary: Electoral strategies for Pakistan's major parties are coalescing in advance of the likely late 2007/early 2008 national and provincial elections. At this stage, most parties, save the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), have adopted a go-it-alone strategy. The ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML), while leaving the door open to seat adjustments and post-electoral coalitions, appears to be ruling out any form of pre-election agreement with other parties, including its current coalition partners. While the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has made much of reconciliation with the PML-N through the Charter for Democracy, its in-country leaders have consistently ruled out electoral alliances with that party and continue to stall on any possible agreement with the PML. We understand from British contacts that perceptions of declining international support for Musharraf may be influencing exiled PPP leader Benazir Bhutto's decision to go-slow on a pre-electoral overture to the PML. Benazir is basing this erroneous view largely on recent USG statements critical of Musharraf's counter-terrorism performance, which she interprets as the USG dumping Musharraf in her favor. Senior PML officials share a similar interpretation. This has the potential to derail efforts at pre-electoral rapprochement between the parties and free and fair elections. End Summary.

Pakistan Muslim League

12. (S/NF) Senior PML officials have reiterated to post over the last week that the party has taken a strategic decision to contest the next elections without any alliances. The party President and Secretary General (refs) have specifically ruled out any pre-electoral deal with the PPP. Seat adjustments with the PPP, JUI-F, and ANP in select districts (principally in NWFP and Balochistan) are under

consideration. Broader alliances with members of the ruling coalition, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), Pakistan Muslim League-Functional (PML-F), PPP-Sherpao, and PPP-Patriots, are reportedly not. PML leaders expect the MQM and PML-F to contest independently in Sindh but to rejoin any post-election PML-led alliance. Seat adjustments with PPP-Sherpao in NWFP are under consideration. PML leaders expect that if PPP-Patriots refuse to join the PML fold, they stand little chance of reelection.

#### Pakistan People's Party

¶3. (S/NF) The in-country leadership of the PPP also appears to be adopting a unilateral election strategy -- its public embrace of the Charter for Democracy notwithstanding. In private discussions over the last several months, rhetoric from senior leaders, including Chairman Makhdoom Amin Fahim, has subtly shifted from pleas for USG assistance in brokering an electoral understanding with the PML to requests simply for a level playing field on which the party can challenge Musharraf. Unlike their PML counterparts, PPP leaders are not basing their strategy on realistic calculations of electoral potential. Rather, they are relying on a vague, and possibly inaccurate, perception of Musharraf's declining domestic support. British diplomats suggest that this PPP analysis has been reinforced by Benazir Bhutto's belief that USG support for Musharraf has declined, obviating any need for her to cut a deal. In such a scenario, PPP leaders believe that the PML vote bank will collapse, ensuring them an easy victory over their ostensible ally the weaker PML-N -- a party with which PPP leaders have made clear they have no intention of governing.

#### Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz

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¶4. (S/NF) The PML-N recognizes that it enters the next elections in a weak position with many of its members having defected to the PML and its traditional supporters divided. Its leaders are wagering the party's future on the Charter for Democracy and wide-ranging seat adjustments with the PPP.

The party hopes to form a de facto anti-Musharraf coalition that will give it access to the PPP's broader support base and prevent a head-to-head contest with its far stronger traditional rival. Party leaders believe that if Nawaz Sharif can burnish his "democratic" credentials, the PML-N can capture enough of the anti-military, urban, middle-class vote in Punjab to position itself as the preeminent center-right party for future contests. Like the PPP, the PML-N strategy presumes a weakening Musharraf and international support. In recent meetings PML-N leaders including Chairman Raja Zafar-ul-Haq have sought USG support for a PPP-PML-N electoral understanding against Musharraf. In this vein, the PML-N leaders have promised no coalition with the JI, cited the anti-American sentiments of some PPP leaders, and denigrated any PML role in future politics.

#### Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal

¶5. (S/NF) The MMA is already a coalition divided with its strongest two parties pursuing independent and contradictory electoral strategies. The JI has made clear its desire to form a broad anti-Musharraf coalition with the PPP and PML-N to "force" the President from office. JI believes that it can position itself at the center of any such campaign, thereby building its support base and placing future PPP and PML-N governments in its debt. Unlike JI, which believes it can capture an increased share of power, the JUI-F is solely interested in keeping the power it has gained in NWFP and Balochistan. PML, PPP, and PML-N leaders have all reported Fazl-ur-Rehman's willingness to work with the election winner for an acceptable price. With the two main parties pursuing their own competing agendas, the relevance of the MMA as a coalition will likely continue to fade, even if formally retained for public relations reasons.

## The Nationalists

¶16. (S/NF) The smaller nationalist parties (save the Baloch which are entirely consumed with provincial strife) seem to be positioning themselves for a hung parliament. Their strategies focus on building working relationships with all three main parties -- PML, PPP, and PML-N -- enabling them to enter coalition with whosoever obtains a plurality. The ANP has proven most adept so far at this strategy. While still retaining close ties with the PML-N and PPP through the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy, ANP leader Asfandyar Wali Khan has recently repaired relations with Musharraf, opening possible avenues for cooperation. All three main parties now see the ANP as a possible partner for seat adjustments and post-electoral coalitions. The MQM would like to be in a similar position. Deputy Convenor Farooq Sattar has repeatedly stressed that the MQM will contest the upcoming elections independently and not/not with the PML. Sattar has attempted to adopt an independent line from the GOP on key issues like provincial autonomy and unsuccessfully to court the PML-N and PPP. Indeed, MQM has sought USG assistance in repairing its relations with these parties.

## The International Role

¶17. (S/NF) The potential role of the international community, particularly the United States, figures prominently in parties' calculations. There is an increasing perception among opposition politicians that the USG has decided to dump Musharraf in favor of one of the former civilian prime ministers. While much of this reflects wishful thinking in light of USG commitments to free and fair elections, recent statements critical of Musharraf's counterterrorism efforts

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coupled with Pakistan sensitivities to the U.S. civil nuclear initiative have increased this view. Conversations with in-country leaders of both parties and British reporting on recent conversations with Benazir Bhutto suggest that this perception is a large factor in refusals to conclude a deal with Musharraf. More troubling still are indications that senior PML officials have reached a similar conclusion. In a recent conversation with PML Secretary General Mushahid Hussain, poloffs were informed of concern within the PML that the USG was abandoning Musharraf in favor of Benazir Bhutto. He expressed relief when assured that this was not the case and that the USG interest was in promoting fair elections, not endorsing any individual or party.

## Comment

¶18. (S/NF) To a degree it appears that parties are calculating election strategies on the basis of inaccurately perceived intentions of the international community. While we will continue to dispel actively any suggestion of declining USG support for the government or U.S. endorsement of Bhutto, we must remember that all parties read more into their interpretations of our behavior than our direct denials on these matters. In this vein, any public suggestion of USG dissatisfaction with Musharraf's role in the GWOT, an area in which we have previously offered visible praise, will be taken as a withdrawal of overall support. This will stymie GOP efforts to conclude an understanding with like-minded parties (PPP and ANP) prior to the election -- probably the best formula for a moderate, stable government after 2007. In a worst-case scenario, if Musharraf feels the international community has abandoned him, he may withdraw his endorsement of a free and fair election and allow massive rigging circa 2002. This would not only be a massive set-back for democratization, but would also deny Musharraf the legitimacy and popular mandate his future government needs to pursue aggressively controversial counter-terrorism programs. End Comment

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